NEU Researchmeet

Communities of practice

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Programme

'Character and integrity in building a community of practice' by Ian Duckett and Joyce I-Hui Chen

'Connecting Communities and Community: Education, Employment and Employability' by Anya Cook

'The need for self created communities to practice when your own communities don't practice' by Peter Shukie

'Independent Working Class Education Network as a Community of Practice' by Colin Waugh

'Constructing resilient education: social practices which form community' by Alex Dunedin

Introduction

Developing research interest and practitioner professional interests together

Both Ian and Joyce who organised and developed the event have extensive experience in further education (FE) and research. They work within the Learning Skills and Research Network (LSRN) in order to do this. LSRN provides a voluntary network of support for research in the sector and is one of the main vehicles for research in the FE sector. The others are the Society for Education and Training (SET) via the Excellence Gateway, SET via their qualification programmes, and a number of smaller networks with more specialist interests and domains outside of FE. These include: Teacher Education in Lifelong Learning (TELL); Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET); Journal of Vocational and Education and Training (JVET); and British Education Research Association (BERA).

We are also seeing a hybrid set of networks that support one another such as #AmplifyFE, which brings together practitioners and college research groups (not formal groups for the most part) and SET. It is organised by the Association of Learning Technologies (ALT) and funded by Ufi (university for industry). ALT is a membership subscription organisation.

Ian and Joyce's introductory presentation gives us a way in to these current developments. They suggest two models are offered for the growth of communities of practice. They are a developmental and organic approach (ultimately drawing on Wenger) or a functional and human capital approach (broadly, what we see as a generic college approach).

Developing an organic community of practice (CoP) needs continual vigilance and support via resources, communications and expert participation. Organic does not mean 'it will happen' or 'you don't have to do anything but watch it grow'. Like gardening, it takes a lot of work to look good. So wanting to develop a community of practice around research means that a lot of attention and thought has to go into it, but it will be worth it. Once the key roles have been established and a group formed, it will take on a life of its own. The example of LSRN is testament to this – a continual effort to focus on research and inquiry has created a very strong FE voice with many organisations and experts interested in the debates.

The development of the Post-16 Network in East Anglia is to create a thinking space, a democratic space and to develop a conference for next year. This shows that within the LSRN network – and the activity of the Eastern region in the NEU – an even stronger FE voice can be detected.

Ian draws on Sennett and character integrity to check the shifts in late capitalism. Ian has experience of FE as a second chance but sees this is less possible for learners now. I would agree with this experience of FE and the current prognosis.

Joyce has developed her interest around teacher trainers in FE and done amazing work in developing the research space.

Other contributions at the event expand on how they have negotiated a CoP in their workspaces which I will now outline.

Colleges and their communities

Views of community can be limited to 'hard working families', but if we look at it theoretically it can be defined at different levels: activity, institution. We can think of community as 'give and take' and as a more reciprocal network of belonging.

Community of place can have a tendency to focus on the location to the exclusion of other aspects of belonging, eg a commuter village or a faith heritage.

FE colleges are essential but overlooked in UK education sectors. With declines in funding and the obstacle of learner loans, learners have more obstacles than in the past to access opportunities and entitlements to learn.

Anya worked with a Muslim group of women to understand and support their campaigns: misogyny and challenging racism. Not in a particular workspace, trade unions, not in any community activity/event – so the dialogue was raised to ask what was their access as a group and as individuals to education?

The women saw education as a route for children, but not for themselves: they had no access or information on college access. Anya linked the group to a trade union education centre and trade union support generally.

They signed up for college courses and developed interactions with other groups – police, local authority, etc.

The college has learned about linking to other communities of interest: a men's Bangladeshi group, GP practices. These are small steps to supporting more communities of interest. The case study showed the outreach function of a college.

History of working class engagement

In Colin's presentation he gave a historical account of how the college space was related to a working class community of practice. Indeed, this is arguably the largest community of interest to FE colleges and yet it is rarely articulated as a 'class' or as having structural relations to other classes within the educational system and how those relations obstruct or hinder. For example, the question on why FE funding is in decline or why the need for a vocational system has not fully developed in England (or indeed other neo-liberal countries – Australia, New Zealand, US, Canada and Japan) may be related to this 'class' interest.

For Colin the voice of working class education is centrally about the development of the International Working Class Education (IWCE), the movement which had its origins prior to the 19th century and, as a term, was used up to the 1920s.

In this 'radical' tradition (for it questioned the interests of other classes and movements and institutions) it developed a self-developing educational programme of Marxism and socialism, grammar and logic. There was homework, assessment and 2½-hour classes.

Mainly young men, working in heavy industry, attended such courses.

The Socialist Labour Party had its own classes: Marx, Gibbons (history of industry) and Buckle (western civilisation); historical materialism and logic; six months of study; less text-heavy, participatory teaching methods.

Ruskin College was developed in the early part of 20th century with two-year residential courses, students sponsored by unions.

Christian Socialists/Workers' Educational Association (WEA) was another network that supported working class education.

It was clear that sections of workers were interested in socialist ideas – but universities (as elite institutions of the time) attempted to offset this by sending out local and community lecturers (Christian Socialism).

A League of the Plebs was set up – opposing traditional economics teaching, WEA interference and the removal of the radical head of Ruskin College at the time. It reached up to 30,000 students but was shut down by the TUC in 1964. The independent Central Labour College was set up.

Socialist change requires an educational arm. The history of working class education and independent education is therefore relevant to challenge current orthodoxy.

What Colin's work shows is that there is a deep history to working class interests in post-16 education and while aspects of it have been absorbed into adult education budgets – TUC education, FE colleges and private providers (entering employment funding) – it is clear that none of this is rooted in a direct democratic relation to working class interests and other community groups.

What do these presentations tell us of current FE research space and how it should develop?

The development of FE communities of practice in FE colleges and across communities should always be run by practitioners and for practitioners (code name Researchmeets). The further a model of development or agency/network is from this, the less impact it will have on sector professionalism and voice.

Due to the fragmentation of research communities of interest, there is an issue of how one reaches a 'critical mass' of interested practitioners. That is, how one moves from the small marginal informal research groups to a more sustainable vehicle that aims to manifest the professional interests of sector practitioners.

At the moment, a variety of agencies and stakeholders would like to influence or direct this activity, or they believe the areas

of research and voice are already defined. This needs to be contested. As much as the current research interested networks help develop some activities that blend with professional interests (research being one), there are also broader, more inquiry-based interests such as we heard at the Eastern event.

What this event did that I haven't seen before is bring together pedagogic, social and institutional issues that called for research interests, but also, and just as importantly, called for a practitioner focus on professional interests. That is: what, why and how do college practices enable or hinder working class communities, groups and others?

Moving from a generic abstract 'learner' to a more variegated idea of social classes, groups and communities – as this event did – gave us a chance to see what would happen if practitioners could discuss (and decide) these matters?

So, it may be important to develop principles of ambition and a modus operandi to enable practitioners to engage and develop in communities of interest around educational practice and professional interests that goes beyond, but alongside, research spaces.

I believe a successful growth in practitioner communities of interest must adhere to the communities that they work in. No agenda can trump the interests and motivations of the communities they are in.

Over time the college community of interest will be tested in regard to different perspectives and agendas, but the fundamentally democratic ethos must be given priority and the key to organisational change.

Ultimately, communities of interests in colleges are in colleges, and so future strategic change should be via their influence.

Hopefully, by being a new actor in the college such groups can interlink with trade unions, community interests and practitioners in a new open way that can become a visible voice of professional interests in the college.

A voice of practitioner expertise, interest and influence.

Such a voice should have a view and influence over CPD, curricula development and design, and teaching practice.

Such democratic professionalism could also influence policy positions in the sector in time.

There is a need now to articulate the principles and ambitions of that democratic professionalism and how its professional interests cohere with the working lives of FE staff.

Norman Crowther

Character and integrity in constructing a community of practice

Introduction

This paper sets out to explore the importance of character and integrity in building and developing a community of practice and charts the progress of the Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN) in East Anglia as a community of practice and the organic model that we are trying to build (Duckett, 2020 and 2021).

Communities of practice

The notion of communities of practice is not new and there has been growing discussion and research on how communities of practice are seen as being a key to improving the performance of individuals and organisations. There are different definitions and understandings of what communities of practice represent. As teachers we construct active learning communities. Vygotsky first coined the phrase "social learning" (Vygotsky,1962). Lave and Wenger (1991) were the first to develop the concept of communities of practice (CoP) in a book called Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation. They define CoP as "a group of people who come together to share common interests and goals, with the aim of sharing information, developing knowledge and developing themselves both personally and professionally" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p29). Later, Wenger redefined CoP as "a group of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise" (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, p139) and "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger et al, 2002, p4). The social learning characteristics of CoP, Wenger (1998) emphasises, include a joint understanding of the purpose of their community, a mutual agreement of how the community evolves and the development of the community's knowledge and practice.

Lesser and Storck (2001, cited in Day, 2017) provide a mapping of how communities of practice connect with social capital and organisational performance. Their 'business-oriented' explanation of how this type of collaboration is implemented, demonstrates a wider range of benefits, including "individual growth, raised expectations, collective sense of trust, identity and well-being and standards of teaching and learning" (ibid, p117). Organisations, particularly in the public sector, often underestimate the power of strong human relationships which build the foundation of an organisation. Self-perpetuating communities of practice not only give organisations 'the golden eggs' but

also 'the goose that lays them'. Cultivating communities of practice provides the fundamental ingredients to constructing human connections and space for potential growth (Wenger and Snyder, 2000).

A community of practice is built on a group of members who share mutual understanding of the community but as Kennedy (2005) argues, the learning experience from a community can vary from positive to passive. The key to maintain a successful community of practice, as Wenger and Snyder (2000) and Kennedy (2005) contend, is to nurture its growth through a structured and explicit relationship built on shared expertise and knowledge.

On the opposite spectrum of traditional continuing professional development models, the principles of CoP significantly focus on equal weighting for everyone involved in the community. Several studies have addressed the importance of trusting relationships and collaboration in teachers' working life (Hargreaves, 1998; Day and Gu, 2010; Coffield, 2014; Day, 2017). This model values individual's knowledge which can potentially lead to transformative learning, but caution is needed when organisations use CoP as managerial jargon or a tool without understanding the fundamental values of CoP and how individuals cannot be forced to integrate into a community without shared trust and beliefs (Chen, 2022).

Growing and sustaining communities of practice has its challenges and goes through cycles of energy with various developmental tensions. One of the key principles to grow and nurture a community of practice is to have a shared domain of energy and value with the intersection of personal meaning and strategic relevance (Wenger et al, 2002).

It is therefore important to consider how character and integrity place such value in maturing communities of practice.

Character and integrity at the heart of communities of practice

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems or an interest in a topic, and who come together to fulfil both individual and group goals. Communities of practice often focus on sharing best practices and creating new knowledge to advance a domain of professional practice.

Some, but not all, aspects of communities of practice are rooted in learning organisations. There are two models of what constitutes a learning organisation. One model is a broader and developmental one which comprises: anticipating future problems; paying attention to the external environment; continuously seeking improvement; approaching problem-solving through conceptual analysis and on an organisation-wide basis; rewarding initiative and creativity; defining jobs to encourage risk-taking, exploration, initiative and knowledge-sharing. It is this organic model that we aspire to. The second model is the much more functional and mechanistic one proposed under the Investors in People (IiP) with its emphasis on "commitment, planning, action, evaluation" (Duckett, 2002). It is the mechanical model we wish to avoid.

Self-evaluation is a crucial component of any learning. Evaluating effectiveness is based on reflective practice, which is an important part of the continuing professional development (CPD) for mediators, not least because it enables them to learn from their experiences. A common model in a

community of practice is the Kolb Cycle. Kolb developed a theory of experiential learning. The Kolb cycle comprises four stages of the learning experience. Practitioners can start at any point of the cycle, but all stages of the learning cycle must be completed in sequence for successful learning to take place. The learning cycle suggests that it is not enough to have undergone an experience, but reflection, analysis and planning for improvement are equally important components of the learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). The learning cycle comprises "concrete experience" or doing/having an experience; "reflection observation", where the experience of mediation is reviewed and reflected on; "abstract conceptualisation" or drawing conclusions and learning from the experience; and "active experimentation", which is planning and trying out what has been learned (Kolb, 1984).

Anticipating future problems; paying attention to the external environment; continuously seeking improvement; approaching problem-solving through conceptual analysis and on an organisation-wide basis; rewarding initiative and creativity; defining jobs to encourage risk-taking, exploration, initiative and knowledge-sharing; community of practice, like integrity and 'character', are also located in and central to the work of Richard Sennett (Sennett, 1998 and 2003).

Old methods of work and the attitude of hard work of the older times no longer exist. Rather than stable jobs and no surprises during a career, workers are currently anticipating the thought that nothing is forever in their jobs, and they must be open to change without notice. Today's workers can no longer expect a long-lasting and faithful job or the trust and loyalty that have been given to workers of their parents' era. In some ways, Sennett argues that this change is certain in order to boost the economy but at the same time corrodes the character of the workers as they no longer understand the meaning of the word loyalty in their professional lives. The hard and rewarding work attitudes are no longer real and achievable, and there is no trust and full dedication on the part of the workers. These progressions are detrimental to maintaining the respect and trust that they (employers and workers) have in each other within the work environment.

Sennett's key themes (Sennett, 1972, 1998 and 2003) are the generational changes within the workforce, the progressions in the economy that are influencing the work environments and the adjustments in the hard work attitude. In Corrosion of Character (Sennett, 2003) in particular, Sennett illustrates his ideas through a conversation with a man named Enrico, a janitor, while writing an earlier book. Enrico is an example of the hard and rewarding work of the Italian immigrant in the United States, who succeeds by his own effort moving from an immigrant neighbourhood to a 'normal' one in the American suburbs. Twenty-five years later, Sennett has a similar experience meeting with Enrico's son, Rico, at the airport. Rico had the ability to make a decent living for himself as an expert in his field, and he clearly had opportunities for studying that led him to a career that was very different from the one that his father chose in the past. Sennett discusses generational changes within the workforce as a result of the importance of recognising the serious effects it has had on the lives of a few individuals. Sennett compares the lives of the father (Enrico) and the son (Rico) to illustrate the colossal changes within the work

environment between one generation and another. The employment opportunities for Rico are no longer long-term, that last from youth to retirement, making employment stability a relic of past times that no longer exists. While the son earns significantly more money than his father did, he faces an uncertain future, since he does not know where his company is going to take him, or to what extent the job will actually last. Enrico's work was ordinary, manual and exhausting, but he knew exactly where he would be and how much he would earn until retiring.

Nowadays we even believe that lifetime stability in a job is not a virtue or a reward for competence, but rather an accommodation of the worker in seeking other opportunities for 'professional growth'. The hypothetical system that Sennett constructs in his book is composed from the point of view of having free initiative, where it is difficult to separate what it is to be professional or to be against the entrepreneur, since the worker is free to go and seek other more lucrative jobs and not be considered part of the company's team. The group and this feeling of belonging to it in the workplace will be encouraged at all costs by modern companies. However, it does clarify that there are no such long-lasting systems in the groups. At the same time that you must be a team player for the company and become a great worker in a group, there is the possibility of a younger someone, with the same or more motivation, taking your place for less money and the same hours. Loyalty does not exist on both sides: from who hires and who works, and therefore Rico's uncertainty in pointing out where he would be in the future, even in the near future, because there are many opportunities for those who seek them. It is an interesting idea to observe the progressions that are occurring in the current working environment for the young professionals and how their parents have difficulty understanding this lack of attachment to a position or company and professional safety of their children.

When Sennett writes: "We are all victims of time and place… we are disconnected… and where am I needed? are facts and questions that cannot immediately be answered" (Sennett, 2003), he is close to the heart of what CoP is struggling with.

A community of practice in progress: a case study of LSRN East Anglia

The LSRN in East Anglia is an open network nurtured by volunteers and convenors who connect and bring practitioners and organisations who are interested in research to work together on ideas and projects. LSRN was set up in 1997 with a group of individuals from further, adult and higher education who were enthusiastic about research in education and started LSRN without any initial funding. Twenty-five years on, LSRN continues to maintain its grassroot and bottom-up approach to engage with practitioners and organisations nationally and internationally. This article would not be made possible if it was not for LSRN and more specifically LSRN East Anglia.

The LSRN East Anglia group is currently co-convened by Ian Duckett and Joyce I-Hui Chen. During the pandemic lockdown in 2021, a virtual research conference by the University of Huddersfield connected Ian and Joyce who are both passionate about practitioner research and policies in education, particularly in the further education and skills sector. Ian and Joyce started making connections through both of their passion about research and the further

education and skills sector. They value the democratic and grassroot origin of LSRN and both reside and work in East Anglia. They share the same vision of bringing practitioners and organisations from all educational sectors together to share ideas, practice and research. Both have strong links with the union background such as the National Educational Union (NEU) and the University and College Union (UCU). LSRN East Anglia was relaunched by Ian in March 2020, and then Joyce suggested becoming a co-convenor to collectively grow a community of practice in the East Anglia region. Since 2021, local networking events and conferences have attracted members from a range of organisations in the region and brought rich experiences, voices and research projects to the community. Topics range from international perspective about education in Cuba, teachers' professional development to alternative feedback strategies for Functional Skills English. Local networking meetings are facilitated by Joyce who uses Thinking Environment components (Kline, 2020) to create an equal thinking space for members to explore ideas, projects and share their best thinking with peers. This community is steadily growing with more members from FE, adult community provision and independent providers to higher education (HE). Everyone is welcomed from all sectors with different experience and knowledge. The next sections include mini biographical pen portraits of both convenors to provide readers a sense of who we are and what our different experiences and knowledge may bring to the community of LSRN East Anglia.

Ian has been a teacher for forty years. A career that has spanned all sectors of education, started in further education (FE), has most recently focused on alternative provision. He is a former development adviser with the Learning and Skills Development Agency and 14-19 adviser for three London local authorities. He is also a Norfolk NEU post-16 officer, Norwich Trades Council education officer, quality improvement partner for Norwich schools and a member of the Socialist Educational Association's (SEA) national executive as well as governor of two schools in Norwich. Ian is a Fellow of both the Chartered College of Teaching (CCT) and the Society for Education and Training (SET). He has published writings widely in curriculum, pedagogy and teacher education, and has vast experience in networking and supporting practitioners at all levels. Joyce has been working in different educational sectors for more than 20 years in Taiwan and in the United Kingdom (UK), from primary education to higher education. Her current job role includes initial teacher education, organisational development and teachers' professional development and learning in a general further education college in England. She is also one of the first chartered teachers with the advanced teacher's status. A college research group has been initiated and developed by Joyce and colleagues at her workplace. She is a member of the Chartered College of Teaching (CCT) and a Fellow of SET. She is a member, and has recently been appointed as the new co-convenor, of the Practitioner Research Special Interest Group (SIG) of the British Educational Research Association (BERA), and is a member of the International Professional Development Association (IPDA). She is also a member and a local branch representative of the UCU. She has published several action research projects over the years and has recently been awarded her Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD).

Conclusion

Some of the lessons learned from the foundation of LSRN East Anglia and its development as a community of practice are:

- Sennett's key themes (Sennett, 1972, 1998 and 2003) are the generational changes within the workforce, the progressions in the economy that are influencing the work environments and the adjustments in the hard work attitude.
- "We are all victims of time and place… we are disconnected… and where am I needed? are facts and questions that can not immediately be answered" (Sennett, 2003).
- We believe we are in the process of creating an equal thinking space for members to explore ideas, projects and share their best thinking with peers. This community is steadily growing with more members from FE, adult community provision, independent providers to HE, and a valid and valuable community of practice.

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Ian Duckett and Joyce I-Hui Chen
Learning and Skills Research Network
East Anglia

Connecting communities and community: education, employment and employability

In a Socialist Educational Association North branch meeting last year, the Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Philipson kept referring to "community" – but what did she mean by that? A community is made up of different communities. Eventually she explained "hardworking families" and this made no sense to me. Or maybe it did. Maybe it excluded rather than included, and I knew it.

Fifty years ago, in Education For A Change, writers Colin and Mog Ball asked: "What is community?"(1). A simplistic understanding of community is an organisation such as a school or hospital, a district maybe or a religious community, defining on a singular commonality, be it location or activity. The Balls say that a vibrant community is one of a multiplicity of interactions on different levels between different groups, connected through a common location or institution. They add that vibrancy is created through service in interactions, give and take, balancing care and concern with access to local knowledge.

There is something here about 'service.' The Sikhs and Hindus talk about seva, from the Sanskrit for service, and the importance of giving to others, providing for elders and those in need, without thought for reward.

For ten years I lived on a housing development on the edge of Newcastle and the marketing bumpf sold a lively, active and engaged community. I was a director of the new community centre which filled with commercial classes, but no communal activity. I wanted vibrancy but it was soulless. People lived in their new-builds with their plasma screens, matching Audis on the drive, a vicious group chat but no-one crossed their manicured lawn to say hello. This was a community of place and not a community of being.

I then moved to Byker, a large council estate, for what was meant to be temporary but became nearly three years because of the pandemic. I was asked why I would want to live there? How awful. But I loved it – the proximity to shops, work, the river, green spaces, community activity and, of course, Newcastle's best pubs were all within a stone's throw. I liked that it wasn't one thing, it was layered, a multiplicity. Yes, there were refugees; yes, there were homeless people and poverty; there were many who were socially engaged, working and not working, and many creatives.

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The Byker community came into its own during Covid with a well-organised, flat-structured mutual aid group that has since evolved post-pandemic, meeting needs, connecting people with local knowledge beyond food parcels and shopping, lightening lives with arts, gardening, cooking and neighbourliness – giving and taking care. A tissue of vibrant layers reverberating with Colin and Mog Ball's service and interactions. This interconnection, engagement and support links directly to our colleges which are anchor institutions, key stakeholders in the communities they serve and can serve, seva.

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said that to give in care, to be compassionate as we might say today, is to be fully human. So, to be fully connected and involved in the community then, is to be fully human; enabling us to reach our own, and meet others', potential. In contrast then, if we're not involved, we're not living a life in full humanity, we're not going to experience full actualisation, which is of course a goal of

education, and we will be less able to support others to get there too.

Further education colleges are an essential, but overlooked, part of our education system, providing academic and technical education, basic skills, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and lifelong learning. With diminished budgets and a 22 per cent cut to funding of adult courses over the last decade combined with financial barriers created by loans to pay for courses, adult participation has dropped and those most affected are from disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Therefore it is no longer enough for colleges to sit and wait for potential students to rock up to enrolment events and sign up for courses that remain funded, but it is advantageous to reach out, step beyond the campus bounds and meet people where they are.

Suffrage Sisters Alliance is, I believe, a really important network of more than 200 women drawn from across Newcastle's mosques, from different backgrounds, cultures, traditions and of different socioeconomic status, education levels and experience. They meet outside of the mosques so their activities and interests are not influenced by anyone else and their aims started out as support, diversity and charity.

I was originally invited, because of my trade union campaigning and organising experience, to provide support and advice on two campaigns the Sisters were running on misogyny as a hate crime and challenging racism. My involvement didn't happen overnight – I was befriended by the founder of the group over a period of time, dined and lunched with, building a relationship long before I was ever introduced to the other women. This relationship, which has grown and fills my heart with joy, becoming one of my closest friendships, is important because of the trust developed. Google 'communities of practice' and every time, trust is listed as essential for growth and for these working relationships to succeed.

The Suffrage Sisters' activity expanded with regular monthly meetings alongside fundraising and organising events. But I wanted to know where these women were – they weren't visible in my workplace, they weren't there in my trade union or community meetings, they just weren't there in the spaces that I was. So ask them, I was told and invited to join them.

I went to their next meeting and talked about education, access to education, the role of the education unions and the Socialist Educational Association, and how they could be involved. It wasn't that these women weren't interested or didn't want to access education but they didn't all have access to the information they needed to make choices or know how to go about finding it.

The feminist writer Bell Hooks spoke of the importance of empowering, building confidence and togetherness through education and learning in order to navigate the system and then challenge where it was needed. Thus for this community of women, increased knowledge combined with growing in confidence will develop the skills needed to strengthen their campaigns and challenge the misogyny and racism they experience. Learning is a multiplier and they will grow.

Responding to feedback from the Sisters, I organised an event with the local People's Assembly group, bringing in the Trade Union Education Centre based in Newcastle College, and women involved in leadership roles in trade unions. The

event, set in the context of what the TUC in 2020 called the North East jobs crisis, provided information and tools on access to adult education, employability skills and workplace protections. Importantly, the event also highlighted what the trade unions can do for women beyond the job; safe organisations founded on anti-discrimination principles that provide training and learning opportunities, presenting opportunities for voices to be heard, enabling access to organisation leaders, taking on roles and positions which they might not have access to in their ordinary working roles.

This event, which came out of some activity in my role with the People's Assembly North East, had in turn come from my branch-leading roles with the UCU. Here I oversaw the biggest growing further education branch for three consecutive years, building on integrity in relationships, consistent casework, effect networking, going out to members on the sites and in the buildings where they were, talking soft politics and listening to them to ascertain direction and what was needed.

Sparking real interest, the Suffrage Sisters have organised further trainings themselves with the Trade Union Education Centre, some women have signed up for IT courses at Newcastle College and others have been involved in a number of Newcastle Council-led community education courses. The Sisters have also continued to run their events, bringing in other organisations such as Safer Cities, the Police and Crime Commissioner, the local MP and councillors, and Citizens Advice.

What the women get from these sessions is different. Some of them are community leaders, some are professionals successful in their field, some were born in the UK, some were not, some have been refugees, some speak English and some are still learning, some are really engaged in the wider community and some rarely leave the comfort of their immediate family network; so individual learning takes place on diverse levels.

Some of the training the Suffrage Sisters have been engaged in has included the menopause, health and other particular women's issues. A need for autism awareness training has come out of discussion in some sessions. A popular training was on internet safety and scams. If you are less able on a computer, not using one for work and if English is not your first language, it is harder to recognise the signs that something isn't right.

A recent training session focussed on the protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010 followed by a session on how to report hate crime; so the women were given knowledge and then told how to apply it. This was powerful training in many ways and really quite something, a privilege, to witness. The women learned that there were more ways than racism to experience discrimination, how to challenge discrimination, that the law was on their side. It triggered conversation as some of the women deconstructed their own experiences within the safe space the group provides, talking about the internalising process of racism and how to resist that, and also how to hold perpetrators of abuse as human, to not dehumanise them, which is disarming but also important so as to not lose one's own humanity.

So some of the trainings organised with and for the Suffrage Sisters has been overtly about providing information and awareness of issues and developing employability skills, but there has been significant learning in social connection, building confidence, esteem and communication skills, which are in themselves, important for employment and for citizenship. Individual women have said how their emerging skills and confidence have impacted on their lives. Mariam said the confidence she gained through the support of the group, in learning about employment and employability, gave her the courage to step up and apply for a job with a local housing association and she is now working full-time, which is wonderful.

My own involvement continues and I am invited both to participate and to support in signposting, providing advice and I have given time to mentor individual women, informally, too. In a humanist model of education where both teacher and student teach and learn, I have experienced learning through this relationship with the Suffrage Sisters, about myself, about communicating information, about others and what other people need, not necessarily about what I think they might need, and that what they need might not be immediately obvious. Being held in some regard builds my own esteem and I believe I gain more than I ever give in what I have learned and experienced: I have heard stories and witnessed growth, I have met strength and humour, resolve and friendship. Learning is a multiplier all round.

Newcastle College and its parent group NCG have gained from the delivery of workshops with the Suffrage Sisters, from students signing up to college courses. They have learned too, about reaching beyond campus, not just delivering off campus. The Trade Union Education Centre is now in contact with the men's group from the Bangladeshi Community Centre and our chief executive has been meeting with a local GP surgery in a ward close to the main campus with the lowest health outcomes in the city – this partnership to arrange learning opportunities will target and meet groups in deprivation, marginalised by poverty and health needs.

These are small, local steps but they are vibrant, interactive connections with local knowledge just as Colin and Mog Ball incentivised.

These are steps towards building what the Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, calls "communities of resistance". By gaining awareness of who we are, by learning how to navigate choices and decision-making, we enable healing and transformation of ourselves, of others and of the community, whatever that community is.

Anya Cook

Note

1. C & M Ball (1973). Education For a Change: Community Action and The School. Penguin.

Independent working-class education as a community of practice

The phrase 'independent working-class education' (IWCE) was probably first used by the south Wales mineworker Noah Ablett at a meeting in 1907. However, the actual practice of IWCE began before 1900 (and remained central to UK working-class activity till at least the late 1920s).

Regarding the teaching and learning method used in IWCE, it will be helpful to look at two descriptions that the former Glasgow foundry worker Tom Bell gave in his autobiography, published in 1941. Bell joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1900, when he was 18, but in the winter of 1902/3 he attended classes run in the Glasgow branch of the Social Democratic Foundation (SDF). (Founded in London in 1883, this was the first and, until 1903, the only organisation in Britain that claimed to be a Marxist party.)

Bell describes these SDF classes as follows:

- We studied that winter Wage Labour and Capital, Value, Price and Profit, the first nine chapters of Das Kapital by Karl Marx; Thorold Rogers' Six Centuries of Work and Wages; H de B Gibbins' Industry in England; and J Richard Green's Short History of the English People. Besides which we took readings in Shakespeare, short lessons on English grammar, and from a little primer on Logic by Prof Stanley Jevons…
- We had two and a half hours' tuition; reading out aloud; questions and answers to last week's lessons; short discussions and examination of homework: after which tea was made and for another hour we talked and discussed freely on all manner of political and educational subjects. An hour's respite and we would repair to Buchanan Street, or to Glasgow Green, to hold forth on socialist propaganda to large audiences who collected there every Sunday night.

Here, then, was a small group composed mainly of young men working six days a week at heavy industrial jobs, and who were prepared each week to spend the afternoon and evening of their one day off on this activity. The course had probably been structured by the stonebreaker Willie Nairn (1856-1902). It used texts by traditional intellectuals as well as by Marx. (The first nine chapters of Capital [or Kapital???], covering well over 300 pages, are usually seen as the most difficult part of that book.) The sessions included free discussion and public speaking, and both activities were intrinsic to the overall learning process.

Bell joined the SDF in February 1903, but by the spring of that year had left it for the breakaway Socialist Labour Party (SLP) which was initiated by the Leith-based engineering worker and university lab technician George

Yates. Bell describes the SLP's classes as follows: (He explains that he himself ran SLP classes using this approach in every year except one till 1920.)

Our method in the classes was to open with an inaugural survey of the whole field we proposed to traverse, and to make the workers familiar with the subject as a whole; the textbooks etc, which included Wage Labour and Capital; Value, Price and Profit; and H de B Gibbins' Industry in England and Buckle's History of Civilisation.

Each student was given a series of definitions of terms used by Marx. These had to be studied, memorised and discussed thoroughly, for perhaps the first four weeks. The student would study Wage Labour and Capital at home. At the class we would read it over paragraph by paragraph, round the class. This practice aimed at helping the students to speak fluently and grammatically. At the following class meeting questions would be put and answered, and the points raised thoroughly understood by everyone, the results of each lesson being summarised by the leader. This method was applied in the same way to industrial history. Later, simple lessons on historical materialism and formal logic were added. So that, after six months of this, every worker who went through the entire session came out a potential tutor for other classes.

So here, then, the course was conducted, at least initially, by people trained within the SDF. The procedure was geared to a wider range of 'students' than the SDF's, for example by being less text-heavy. It was highly participatory, and structured in such a way as to equip participants to tutor others as well as becoming more educated themselves.

As background to these descriptions of IWCE practice, there are some points it may be useful to bear in mind. First, grassroots members of the SDF had used similar methods for several years, but without the leadership's approval. Secondly, the SLP had originally been set up in the USA in 1877, but from about 1890 came to be dominated by the Marxist former academic Daniel De Leon (born in Curacao in 1852). Thirdly, as we shall see, De Leon's ideas strongly influenced IWCE in Britain. Fourthly, the British SLP was set up in Scotland by former SDF members who in 1903 were expelled from the SDF for disagreeing with the leadership's willingness to go along with the participation of French socialist MPs in a bourgeois government – in other words over their insistence on working-class independence in the sphere of politics. (They also opposed the ILP's electoralist collusion with the Liberal Party, and criticised what they saw as the SDF's willingness to collude with the ILP over this.) Fifth, both the US and UK SLP groups were strongly influenced by the 1905 uprising of workers in Russia, the former collaborating in that year with other groups to set up the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organisation, and the latter too promoting the idea of industrial – as distinct from trade – unions. Both SLPs, then, now saw the leaders of unions composed only of skilled workers as "labour lieutenants of the capitalist class", a phrase used favourably by the AFL leader Samuel Gompers but converted by De Leon to a term of abuse. It can be seen, then, that by this stage the SLP in Britain stood for working-class independence in the political and economic spheres as well as in that of workers' education. (The South Wales Socialist Society (SWSS), in which Noah Ablett was a central figure, had a similar approach.)

Let us turn now to the decisive series of events that came to a head between 1907 and 1909 in relation to Ruskin College, which was in Oxford but not part of the university.

Ruskin College was set up in 1899 by three left-wing people from the USA: Walter Vrooman, his wife Amne Vrooman and Charles Beard. They appointed as principal the former Anglican priest, Denis Hird, who had by this time become an SDF member, a prominent speaker on Darwinian evolution and author of the pamphlet Jesus the Socialist, said to have sold 70,000 copies.

Ruskin provided two-year residential courses for workers, along with a correspondence network. In 1902, the founders went back to the US, with the result that the college's funding was no longer assured. By this time most students at Ruskin were sponsored by unions, especially the South Wales Miners Federation (SWMF) and the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS), a precursor of today's RMT. These and other sponsoring unions employed rigorous procedures to weed out people who hoped to use study at the college as a route out of industrial work, with the result that most students then at Ruskin were highly motivated leftwingers.

From the 1880s wider sections of UK workers than hitherto developed an interest in socialist ideas. As a consequence, some universities began to send staff round the country giving public lectures intended to counter this. Oxford, through its Extension Delegacy, controlled by upper class Christian socialists, was one of these universities. However, workers soon lost interest in extension lectures.

In 1884 Samuel Barnett, an Anglican vicar in the East End of London, had set up the Toynbee Hall 'settlement', where Oxford graduates and some tutors came to live and to mingle with working-class people. At Toynbee Hall, Barnett developed a form of 'tutorial' class that successfully engaged workers. In about 1899 one such worker, the Co-operative Society clerk Albert Mansbridge, set about trying to persuade the Oxford Extension Delegacy that a system of tutorial classes, for example in non-Marxist economics, would be more effective than extension lectures at enticing workers away from socialism. One aspect of this was the idea that a layer of workers selected through tutorial classes would do a special diploma in orthodox economics at Oxford itself.

In 1902 Robert Morant, the top civil servant at the Board of Education, wrote into the Tory government's Education Act a clause conferring on the local education authorities then being established a power to fund tutorial classes. In 1903, with Extension Delegacy backing, Mansbridge set up the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) to lobby for, and hopefully help to implement, this approach. For this to happen, a residential base in Oxford for working-class students would be required.

In 1907, after years of lobbying by supporters of Ruskin, the TUC finally asked constituent unions to support the college financially, thereby offering Ruskin a secure future as a labour college. The WEA and Oxford Extension Delegacy now realised that they must get control of Ruskin as a base for their intended economics diploma before it was too late. They manoeuvred to this end at many levels, including via the House of Lords and print media. They also nominated new governors to the board of

Ruskin, who in turn appointed new staff there. They tried to use these governors and staff members to undermine Denis Hird's authority. In 1907 they produced a report titled Oxford and Working-Class Education in which they spelled out how they thought workers' education should be conducted. Then, in 1908, the new governors of Ruskin introduced regulations that required students seeking to enter the second year to sit exams, made essay writing compulsory, prohibited students from public speaking and banned Hird from teaching sociology.

The students began to organise against these changes, and for Ruskin to become purely a labour college. They set up the League of the Plebs to promote this. This name was inspired by Daniel De Leon's pamphlet Two Pages from Roman History. They produced a document called The Burning Question of Education, a title that referenced De Leon's pamphlet The Burning Question of Trade Unionism. They also began to boycott the classes in pro-capitalist economics taught by newly-appointed lecturers, organising instead their own study sessions along SDF, SLP and SWSS lines.

In January 1909 the first WEA tutorial classes were introduced, in Rochdale and Stoke-on- Trent, and as Mansbridge had predicted, these seemed to be engaging successfully the interest of workers. Finally, in March 1909 the governors of Ruskin dismissed Hird for "failing to maintain discipline".

Ablett and other mineworkers from south Wales, along with the south Wales railway worker Will Craik, the Bermondsey carpenter George Sims and the Follonsby mineworker and SLP member George Harvey, now led all 54 students in a 'strike' demanding Hird's reinstatement. This action hit national headlines. Nobody thought that miners and railway workers would take on the most prestigious university in the world.

In response, the governors closed the college for two weeks, prompting many students to go back to their home areas and set up IWCE classes there. (These areas included the south Wales and Durham coalfields, Sheffield and many factory towns in Lancashire, where the textile worker Alice Smith would soon emerge as a key figure.) A decision was taken by the most active group of students to set up a college independent of Ruskin and, in August 1909 at a meeting in Oxford, a wide spectrum of left-wing activists, including Mary Bridges Adams, voted to support this. The Central Labour College (CLC) was set up in Oxford, moving shortly afterwards to London. The Plebs League established itself as a national IWCE organisation, producing the monthly Plebs magazine, commissioning and publishing its own textbooks, linking the 'colleges' – ie groups of evening classes – that now grew strongly in many places, and running a national correspondence set-up. In 1921 the local classes and correspondence operation became the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC), which at its peak in the mid-1920s had 30,000 students. This continued till the TUC shut it down in 1964.

In conclusion

There is no chance that the capitalist class and its direct agents will solve the problems facing humanity now; only a self-organising working-class movement can do this; such a movement will either build a coherent educational dimension of its own or go round in circles. Therefore, we now must learn from the IWCE movement.

Colin Waugh

Constructing resilient education: social practices which form community

Setting the scene of the fractured environment

In this presentation, we will examine some key social practices which have been useful for the embodiment of the Ragged University project reflecting on ideas of communities of practice in the light of the social, economic and cultural configuration of present-day Britain. In an increasingly corporate and globalised world (Locke & Spender, 2011), where educational practices are often overly affected by financialisation (Shaxson, 2019), there is a need to create systems of education and learning which are 'resilient' for the learner rather than the organisation.

This is done specifically in response to the sociological environment having become dominated by centralised, vertically integrated, command and control corporate projects whereby the experience of people is kept in a constantly 'fractured' state. I argue that corresponding to the denudation and homogenisation of the natural world (Hayhow et al, 2019), we are experiencing a denudation and homogenisation of the sociological world which significantly includes learning and education.

For many there is not even the time or resources to maintain sufficient nurture of ties with family and friends let alone achieve professional goals. A simple axiom which helps expose the dynamics of this fractured state is "if you are not financially poor, you are likely time poor". I am raising an important cultural question by situating learning within the fractured environment which causes so many valuable educational endeavours to become fragile, altered and/or disappear. Orienting organisational practices to respond to hostile environments is a vital strategy.

This fractured state interferes with the planning of projects outside of corporate structures, and when projects are performed within the corporate structures, they have any non-contiguous values and practice altered to corporate agendas, or obscured. Key examples include the radical narrowing and hollowing out of the subject area of political economy; also how 'critical pedagogies' can end up in forms which fail to critically challenge any arrangement.

The corporate denudation of the sociological environment

Corporate education suffers from generations of managerial practices which Prof Joel Bakan summarises neatly – corporations are "externalising machines" (Bakan, 2012); in that, as structures they externalise what they perceive to be costs and enclose what they perceive to be benefits. As a result, despite many of its practitioners' best efforts, education as a sector demonstrates diminished interest in provision of a public good in favour of 'market values' – more explicitly, 'stock market values'.

The corporate management of the world of music production and football offer strong analogies to what is manifest in the education (and other) sectors. The idea that the current configuration of the music industry (Knox, 2021) or FIFA (Jennings, 2011 and 2015) supports the diversification rather than the standardisation and commodification of music and sport is specious to the point of fallacy. The corporate environment must be understood as hostile to diversification, innovation and invention. In response to this, for those situated outside of the corporate it is imperative to adopt tactics which build capabilities to "adapt, improvise and overcome" (Barclay, 2011) expecting disruptive and dislocating cultural forces.

My interest in particular focuses on social practices which can serve individuals and populations who are disenfranchised by the financialised and social status-laden, credentialised landscape to generate educational trajectories in their lives; our lives. This draws heavily on critical lessons surfaced in the field of international development (Groves & Hinton, 2013) which I suggest are becoming vitally important for surviving in post-industrial societies such as Britain as much as economically sacked nations which are labelled as 'developing' (Stiglitz, 2002).

Basing organisational practices on elements autonomous of dominating corporate structures means that whatever community looks like, it is less likely to take on the corrosive behaviours and practices propagated by corporate shaping forces. Increasingly academics must develop work in their own unpaid time should they want to diverge from curricular mandates, develop research perspectives or critically enrich student experience. In a related way, for many learner-thinkers they must develop their own education which pertains to human development independently from support of centralised resourced structures, in their own terrain, via what means they have available to them.

Moving from corporate structures into social practices

Learning from experience, the Ragged University website serves as a social document of adaptive efforts to run a project of education since before 2010. A key moment of learning came at the point when Ragged University eventually became a registered charity before the immediate move to close it as this legal entity (Dunedin, 2019b). This counter-intuitive direction was taken after reflecting on the nature of how the third sector and the public sector are now formulated as extensions of the financial sector reinforcing complex structural problems.

This decision was made partly through recognising that formalised organisational structures commonly get colonised by the administrations of chasing resources and gatekeeping ingroups (Elias & Scotson, 2008). Alongside these issues are problems with infrahumanisation psychology (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). The choice was made to close the project as a charity to focus on the development of understandings which constitute a practical philosophy (Dunedin, 2021) which could protect the ideas of education and learning as something that any individual can embody in their own context free of chains of dependency. This strategy aimed to open up spaces structured around fluid collegiality rather than the damaging corporate practices that pit colleague against colleague for resources that are made artificially scarce.

Culturally this 'X-Factor'-like pattern of competition has been promoted to the exclusion of other dynamics as a mode of governance which rules through division, holding within it the anthropological legacy of colonial Britain. Britain was arguably the first place to be colonised in these respects. We must recognise and scrutinise deeply how corporate administrative systems have emerged from the East India Company as their historical progenitor (Robins, 2017). The creation of Britain as a society of extreme inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Alston, 2018 and 2020; Marmot, 2022) has brought with it crystallising caste systems (McCrone, 2022) codified with "hierarchies of legitimacy" (Elias, Martins & Whitley, 1982) that penultimately are used to demarcate social and intellectual distinction (Bourdieu, Nice & Bennett, 2010) and ultimately access to opportunity.

Conceptualising the organiser as reader

If you conceptualise the co-ordinator of the events as the reader in a subject, this elementary practice provides opportunity to build off the back of learning experiences and shared activities. In this framing, understanding the educational affordances of interpersonal interaction (Dunedin, 2022) has taken centre stage providing considerable sociological substrate [likened to a mycelium] sufficient to manifest valuable social relations ["invisible colleges" (Dunedin, 2015)] for activities commonly associated with higher education.

By the individual organising their self-directed educational strategy in ways designed for coalescence as well as pragmatic independence of activity, planning can manifest within and around the chronically changing shape of circumstance. The Ragged University project has learned much from how musicians and artists organise in the hostile over-financialised landscape of Britain.

David Hughes, Carrie Westwater and David Newman of the Theatre Found troupe in Glasgow – who used public spaces to deliver theatre – played a significant role in evolving Ragged University strategies for using available space. Musicians in Manchester developed important project strategies for working as an individual when other artists were not available while planning co-ordinated events as opportunity allows. As well as this, Daniel Zambas and Gary Boast, two skilled musicians, demonstrated with acumen how to co-ordinate and deliver 72 events over a month in the 2011 Edinburgh Festival through using organisational tools, basic communications and remote support.

These individuals demonstrated the kind of sovereign creative thinking which enabled the delivery of public education events without money, and stand as exemplars of how to operate dynamically in the hostile and fractured environment. The educational practice of Ragged University has benefited from lessons learned from artists who continue their work in the face of problematic circumstances; they also helped dis-engorge the project of education from managerial practices which this author attempted to introduce after being inducted into the Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce. Their influence through illustration of more effective, less distorting ways of working has been so profound that it has fed into theorising "knowledge as an art object" (Dunedin, 2019a). This idea expresses how creating artefacts of learning embodies the values, exercises and skills associated with developing art works. If you take the artist as the primary attainer of insight in the process of creating a work of art, in a correlated way we may view the co-ordinator of educational activities as sovereign of their efforts and inspirited with the activity they perform.

Use available infrastructure and common technology

Inspiration has been drawn from Rabindranath Tagore who expressed how all he needed to make his school was the shade of a tree to sit in (Dunedin, 2012). This means in practice using public spaces like pubs, cafés, libraries, parks and other spaces which are free to use and that allow individuals to negotiate and re-negotiate (Brown, 2015) how they interact in those spaces. Specifically, these are spaces where knowledge and practices which have been enveloped by institutions and professions are re-appropriated and re-organised as part of an open shared commons. Examples are ownership of speciated language, written works, referencing information sources and seeking the review of peers – all of which have become commonly associated as belonging to, and within, the academy; however all originate from inside the interpersonal spaces in the lives of individuals.

For those whose interests sit outside of the financialised and power-laden enclosure of corporately organised education, the capacity to adapt to, and use, available infrastructure as a substrate of learning activities is a key axiom. In Ragged University this has been conceptualised as a part of the 'living curriculum' which draws on the world around in order to generate higher educational outcomes (Dunedin, 2022).

Using common technology rather than cutting edge technology is an important part of the core formulation. The hopes and dreams of the digital represent the source of many of the problems we are facing today (Eubanks, 2019; O'Neil, 2016). Stepping back from the corporate shaping of the means of production means being able to not use stock market driven products and services such as those offered by Microsoft, Apple, Google and other monopolistic behemoths (Salinger, 2013) in favour of technologies which are capable of functioning independently of paywalls and the dependency capitalism they engineer. Good examples of such pedagogical technologies include dialogue, paper and ink, and open source silicon technologies like Linux.

Learning in the wild

Learning 'in the wild' therefore reconfigures such elements as activities and goods no longer officiated by financialised hierarchies but instead as intrinsically owned activities which embody value and function in the lives of practitioners.

The modern experience of living lives in the interstices of what has been commanded by the mechanical structures of society must be acknowledged and drawn upon to search for educational means that do not just re-create the landscape we already exist under/in. Envisioning co-ordinating organisational practices so that they may function when faced with the fracturing of finance and/or having time as a capacity is a critical evolution for medium and longer term community.

To find communities which can practice, individuals must reformulate efforts for the hostile environment of this mismanaged country and sector (Sweeney, Despota & Lindner, 2013) in order to protect "education as human development" (Dunedin, 2019c).

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